A judge had no business praising climate protesters Jawad Iqbal

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Body

What message exactly did the district judge Stephen Leake hope to send by declaring that he was "personally inspired" by a group of Insulate Britain protesters charged with causing disruption on the M25? Surely it is the role of a judge to stick to the facts, apply the law and pass sentence. It is not for him to use the court as a pulpit for his personal views and effectively lavish praise on lawbreakers.

Protesters blocked traffic by sitting on the motorway, disrupting the journeys of an estimated 18,000 drivers; some glued themselves to the tarmac, another refused to move out of the way of an ambulance taking a patient to hospital. Even so, the judge told them that their impassioned speeches in court about climate change had inspired him, declaring: "I have heard your voices".

Would he have felt inspired if he had been the patient in the ambulance or if his own journey to court had been delayed? In fining them, Leake added: "These are difficult cases for us judges because we have to apply the law and that is what we have sworn our judicial oaths to do." Is it really that uncomfortable to stand up for the rule of law? He even felt compelled to make a public pledge, saying: "Personally I intend to do what I can to reduce my own impact on the planet."

Leake isn't the only person who has been tempted to make an idiot of himself in public when it comes to the antics of eco-warriors. Ben Goldsmith, a senior adviser in the environment department, broke cover to publicly back Extinction Rebellion fuel protests, which have caused chaos at petrol stations. He declared it was justified as a way to "wake people up" to the climate emergency. "I'm with Extinction Rebellion," he chirped in a tweet - only to reverse course and apologise after widespread criticism and calls for him to be sacked from his government role.

The climate emergency is real enough. Everyone gets that. The protesters absurdly claim that they have exhausted all other means of raising the issue and that disruption is the only way forward. This is not true. There are plenty of ways of arguing for a cause in a democracy but it usually involves the hard slog of developing policy ideas and practical solutions. The juvenile antics of the protesters, and the public posturing of fellow travellers like Leake and Goldsmith, advance the case for change not one jot.

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